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# Where are we going as we leave no child behind? La technique and Postman, Papert, and Palmer — Part Three

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# Where are we going as we leave no child behind? La technique and Postman, Papert, and Palmer — Part Three

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# Where are we going as we leave no child behind? La technique and Postman, Papert, and Palmer — Part Three

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**Part One**

**Part Two**

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In our rush to reform education, we have forgotten a simple truth: reform will never be achieved by renewing appropriations, restructuring schools, rewriting curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called the teacher on whom so much depends. Teachers must be better compensated, freed from bureaucratic harassment, given a role in academic governance, and provided with the best possible methods and materials. But none of that will transform education if we fail to cherish and challenge the human heart that is the source of good teaching. [1]

## 1. Mindstorms and Technopoly revisited

In the first two parts of this series I argued that the fundamentally human character of education is being increasingly invaded by technical thinking that reduces education to a production task. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), frequently referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), provides a quintessential example of this phenomenon as it plays out in the policy arena. In NCLB a standards-based curriculum furnishes the “production specifications”; standardized assessment tools function as quality control checkpoints; and mandated performance levels determine whether or not schools are making “adequate yearly progress” in an effort to identify “failing schools.” It is precisely this kind of “school reform” that Palmer warns us about in the quote above, though his book was published years before the legislation was passed.

The previous two parts of this series highlighted two contemporary thinkers who have particular insight into the technical thinking that dominates our time: the late Neal Postman, a perceptive critic of technology who describes this technical thinking as “technopoly,” [2] and Seymour Papert, who has made the surprising argument that the technical thinking found in our schools can be undone through particular uses of technology [3]. Papert and Postman had some ongoing debates, with Papert cast in the role of a “techno-utopian” (based on over three decades of work developing the computer language Logo and a number of other constructionist computer applications for children) and Postman cast in the role of “techno-critic” (based on the publication of over twenty books including *Technopoly* and *Amusing Ourselves to Death*). But in my first two articles I pointed out the connection between both of them—their concern with *la technique* as described by the French social thinker Jacques Ellul in 1948 [4]. Both Papert and Postman recognize the problem technical thinking poses to our society. Paradoxically it is the “techno-utopian” Papert who much better understands the threat that technical thinking poses to schools today as opposed to Postman, who tends to confuse the threat of technical thinking with the presence of technical objects (like computers) in the schools.

If education is being increasingly dominated by this sort of technical thinking, then what should be an appropriate response? In the third and final part of this series I further explore the fundamentally human character of education through the writing of Parker Palmer. Postman’s premise was that the uncontrolled growth of technology (or Postman’s technopoly) destroys the vital sources of our humanity; Papert is particularly perceptive in noting the invasion of this kind of technical thinking into the institution of school, yet points out that for many teachers a certain sense of self resists; Palmer tries to nurture that teacher’s resistance through his discussions in *The Courage to Teach*. He has written eloquently about the importance of this human side of teaching and the extent to which it is neglected.

## 2. Parker Palmer and *la technique*

There are few who have written as directly about the fundamentally human character of teaching as Parker Palmer. Palmer’s critique echoes that of Jacques Ellul’s *la technique* in some intriguing

ways. First he notes that teaching today is increasingly reduced to technique. For example, Palmer begins by pointing directly at the threats to good teaching. As the first quote in this article indicated, in the rush to reform education we are failing both to challenge and to cherish the human center of all good teaching. One of the first problems is the rapid pace of a technological society—something Jacques Ellul also pointed out back as early as 1964 [5]. “The pace of change has us snarled in complexities, confusions, and conflicts that will diminish us, or do us in, if we do not enlarge our capacity to teach and to learn” [6].

But more than just adapting to a rapid pace of change, the bigger problem for Palmer is the way we think about or frame the problems that face us. “We turn every question we face into an objective problem to be solved and we believe that for every objective problem there is some sort of technical fix. That is why we train doctors to repair the body but not to honor the spirit; clergy to be CEO’s but not spiritual guides; teachers to master techniques but not to engage their students’ souls [7]. This analysis echoes Postman’s ideas about the problem with our current technopoly — every problem is thought of as a technical problem, and so the only solutions that “count” in our culture are technical solutions [8]. Anything else is merely “subjective” or anecdotal, incidental to the technical endeavor and not worthy of recognition. Better teaching is reduced to improved techniques that enable better measurable outcomes—a fundamental assumption of the NCLB legislation.

Palmer thinks that there has been an overemphasis on technique due to our current way of thinking in this “culture of disconnection.” But that is not to say that there is no place in his way of thinking for improved teaching techniques. Technique, while currently overemphasized, does have a role to play: “Here I believe is the proper and powerful role of technique: as we learn more about who we are, we can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes.” [9]. Better teaching techniques can be a means for revealing our human identity, which is the center from which good teaching radiates for Palmer. “Listening to the inner teacher also offers an answer to one of the most basic questions teachers face: How can I develop the authority to teach, the capacity to stand my ground in the midst of the complex forces of both the classroom and my own life?” [10]

But in our current “culture of technique, we often confuse authority with power, but the two are not the same. Power works from the outside in, but authority works from the inside out. Authority is granted to people who are perceived as authoring their own words, their own actions, their own lives, rather than playing a scripted role at great remove from their own hearts. When teachers depend on the coercive powers of law or technique, they have no authority at all” [11]. In a technopoly where all “serious” solutions are technical solutions, it is only in proposing a technical solution that we appear to have any power. In the thinking of NCLB, the only serious proposals are those that help insure “adequate yearly progress” for students in “failing schools.” Any other proposals are merely on the periphery—sentimental at best.

This confusion of authority with power has other consequences according to Palmer. As teachers we become increasingly unable to even discuss our work in a substantive fashion with

colleagues. “Our tendency to reduce teaching to questions of technique is one reason we lack a collegial conversation of much duration or depth. Though technique-talk promises the ‘practical’ solutions that we think we want and need, the conversation is stunted when technique is the only topic: the human issues in teaching get ignored, so the human beings who teach feel ignored as well. When teaching is reduced to technique, we shrink teachers as well as their craft—and people do not willingly return to a conversation that diminishes them” [12]. The thesis of this series of articles is that the fundamentally human character of education is being increasingly invaded by technical thinking that reduces education to a production task. Palmer points out that it is this reduced task that teachers find alienating.

For Palmer, good teaching comes not from technique, but from the teacher’s identity. That identity can guide a teacher toward an integral technique, one that can help the teacher express his or her identity more fully [13]. For Palmer this kind of paradoxical thinking is the key to “thinking the world together” instead of thinking the world apart [14].

According to Palmer, our current either-or thinking fuels a current culture of disconnectedness. This either-or thinking has given us great analytical tools and is the key to science. “But for all the power it has given us in science and technology, either-or thinking has also given us a fragmented sense of reality that destroys the wholeness and wonder of life. Our problem is compounded by the fact that this mode of knowing has become normative in nearly every area, even though it misleads and betrays us when applied to the perennial problems of being human that lie beyond the reach of logic” [15]. Palmer’s words here echo Jacques Ellul’s ideas about *la technique*, the technical way of thinking whose primary characteristic is that it invades every sphere of human activity [16]. Ellul analyzed the problem in a fashion similar to Palmer, though from the perspective of postwar France instead of the United States at the end of the 20th Century.

Central to Ellul’s response was the idea of dialectic, or paradox, that Palmer also employs. “In certain circumstances, truth is found not by splitting the world into either-ors but by embracing it as both-and. In certain circumstances, truth is a paradoxical joining of apparent opposites, and if we want to know that truth, we must learn to embrace those opposites as one” [17]. Ellul argued for this same kind of dialectical approach, noting that for many North American readers the key challenge in understanding his writing is in understanding dialectic [18].

### 3. Palmer and productivity

Palmer’s analysis of technique and his advocacy for a dialectical response parallels Ellul. What Postman has called technopoly and Ellul has described as *la technique* Palmer might describe more generally as social imagination. For Palmer technique is an example of “the invisible structures and secret signals that shape our social lives, that have a power over us that I thought resided only in face-to-face relationships” [19]. These social structures determine or make choices for us, often in ways we do not comprehend.

But one key difference between Ellul and Palmer is that Palmer is more optimistic about the possibility of individual change in the face of technopoly. Palmer argues that “the world of social structures and signals need not dictate our lives” [20]. But Ellul is less optimistic. He certainly believes that these social structures do not have to dominate our lives and some sort of liberation is possible, but only to the extent that new social structures will form and determine us once again.

One of Ellul’s most powerful points is the pervasiveness of technical thinking. Even when we try to think in a less technical fashion, the rationale we give for this change in thinking is often, paradoxically, a technical one. This is not due to some sort of character defect in the person proposing the change, but is instead due to the widespread influence of technical thinking that means that we really are only able to think in technical terms.

One example of this in Palmer’s writing is in the chapter describing teaching in community: a subject centered education from *The Courage to Teach*. Here Palmer describes a case study of a medical school reform. He describes how the reform began with the dean and a few faculty colleagues becoming concerned that “the compassion that had led many of these students to enter medical school had largely disappeared by the time they completed their studies” [21]. This group began arguing for an alternative approach, moving from a traditional presentation/recitation competition model to one based on an applied problem-based approach using directed inquiry from a faculty mentor. This approach was intended to re-center the educational endeavor around nurturing students’ compassion for the patient, their desire to help heal people. Lecture, labs, seminars, workshops, and independent research were all still a part of this alternative approach, but at the center were these small groups of students gathered around real patients with a faculty mentor leading the inquiry as to what to do to help that patient. The approach had its critics within the school of medicine. Faculty thought the small groups would result in improved bedside manner and medical ethics of the graduates. But the standardized test scores, which are so important in medical education (i.e. measures of “productivity”) in determining both student career paths and the medical schools’ reputation, would suffer.

Surprisingly, the dean of the school of medicine reports, after six years of this new model, the standardized test scores were slowly rising. “In this approach to medical education, our students not only become more caring but also seem to be getting smarter, faster” [22]. Palmer’s example is a persuasive one about the practical value of rethinking the educational endeavor in more human terms. But for the purposes of this article it is helpful to note that the rationale supporting this more human approach is, in the end, technical. Preparing students who are more caring would not be sufficient; improving educational productivity is what really makes the case.

This is not to suggest that Palmer is in any sense hypocritical in advocating for a more human approach to medical education. The point is instead how pervasive technical thinking has become, which was precisely Ellul’s point when he first talked about *la technique* more than fifty years ago. This technical way of thinking is one of those invisible structures that have a power over us, as Palmer described in his discussion of the social imagination. Because of those

structures Palmer gives a technical justification for a human solution—and we are frequently compelled to do the same in all human endeavors. That is the quintessence of Ellul's idea of la technique and Postman's notion of technopoly [23].

#### 4. Notes

[1] Palmer, Parker J. (1998). The courage to teach : exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life. Page 3. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[2] Part one of this series was published in the February 2004 edition of the Berglund Journal, accessed at <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2004/01/0104.php>.

[3] Part two of this series was published in the April/May 2004 edition of the Berglund Journal, accessed at <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2004/03/0304.php>.

[4] See the chapter "The Means and the Ends" in Ellul, Jacques. The Presence of the Kingdom. Trans. Olive Wyon. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951. London: SCM, 1951. Republished in New York: Seabury, 1967 and Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989. Originally published in French as *Présence au monde moderne: Problèmes de la civilisation post-chrétienne*. Geneva: Roulet, 1948. Lausanne: Presses Bibliques Universitaires, 1988. See also The Technological Society. Trans. John Wilkinson. New York: Knopf, 1964. London: Jonathan Cape, 1965. Rev. ed.: New York: Knopf/Vintage, 1967. Originally published in French as *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1954. Republished in Paris: economica, 1990.

[5] See particularly Ellul, Jacques. (1964). The Technological Society.

[6] Palmer, p. 3.

[7] Palmer, p. 19.

[8] Postman, Neil. (1993). Technopoly : the surrender of culture to technology. New York : Vintage Books.

[9] Palmer, p. 24.

[10] Palmer, p. 32.

[11] Palmer, p. 32-33.

[12] Palmer, p. 145.

[13] Palmer, p. 63.



[14] Palmer, p. 61-62.

[15] Palmer, p. 62.

[16] Ellul, Jacques. (1980). Perspectives on our age. p. 37. New York: Seabury Press.

[17] Palmer, p. 63.

[18] "On Dialectic" by Jacques Ellul in Christians, C.G. and van Hook, J.M. (eds). (1980). Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays, page 292. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

[19] Palmer, p. 26.

[20] Palmer, p. 28.

[21] Palmer, p. 124.

[22] Palmer, p. 126.

[23] Additional examples in which Palmer gives technical justifications for human solutions include his discussion of Polanyi's insights about the personal element of knowing and the way it leads to new discoveries in science (Palmer, p. 99)

## 5. Resources about Parker Palmer

<http://www.miracosta.edu/home/gfloren/palmer.htm>

A website devoted to Parker Palmer's book The Courage to Teach.

## 6. References

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